

Facilitator Guidelines

Keep these points in mind as you help your group with its brain-storming task.

Brainstorm:

- Welcome everyone. Introduce yourself. You are a helper, not a brain-stormer.
- Restate their task and point to the bullets on their instruction sheet. It will save much time if they write large and list only one characteristic per card.
- Make sure everyone has cards and markers.
- Get them started with writing their answers to the question. Encourage them to write as many answers as they can. The idea at this stage is to generate as many characteristics of community acceptability as we can.
- Encourage everyone to use the silent time to write answers to the question.

Round-Robin:

- Make everyone feel at ease and accepted. When you start asking for answers, ask people to say their name and where they live. Then try to use their name when you come back around for more answers.
- Only take one answer at a time. The goal at this stage is legibility. Do not question the validity of a characteristic. Just make sure it is in proper form (e.g., “most ____”) and that the whole group understands.
- Always ask each person as you go around. A person can pass, but they also can come up with ideas as the list of answers is generated by the group.
- It is up to the participant to decide whether their answer duplicates another answer. If they think it is different from one already posted, then post it, too.
- Keep the process moving to make sure everyone has a chance to post their answers.

Clarification/Grouping:

- Ask if everyone understands the posted answers. If an answer needs clarification, the proposer is the one who clarifies.
- Ask the group if they see common themes for the answers. Write the themes in different areas of the easel sheet and start moving the cards that fit the theme. A proposer can disagree if they do not want their answer grouped in a particular theme.

Break and Bring Sheets/Cards to Front:

- Thank everyone for contributing.
- Tell them to get up, stretch and reconvene with the whole group.

See notes below for general guidelines to encourage small group process, to control hostility and to value different points of view.

Dialogue: The Exchange of Information

From: Ragan, James F., Jr. 1977. The effective meeting in water quality planning. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Public Affairs. May. pp. 29-30.

This section presents suggestions for making small group discussion effective.

The Nature of Ad Hoc Discussion Groups

An informal public meeting brings together for a brief period a group of people representing a wide variety of interests. These participants constitute an ad hoc group—that is, they are called together for a specific situation. People enter such groups with their own expectations, perceptions, personal stature, roles they will play, and attitudes. Unlike continuing group processes (as with advisory committees), there is little opportunity in ad hoc groups to work out and accommodate "personal agendas." In ad hoc groups, discussion will not always be orderly. There will be many excursions, some of which are beneficial. Conflict is inevitable and desirable.

Consensus among people brought together briefly is rarely possible. People express opinions with little chance that they can be reconciled with different opinions expressed just as strongly. The discussion goal in water quality planning is: *To obtain the full articulation of views and (perhaps) to reach some sense of agreement and disagreement*, consensus is not a goal.

Facilitating Discussion

This section is directed to the small group discussion moderator—suggestions for making discussions productive. The remarks that follow are intended to stimulate moderators to be creative and resourceful. To get the most from the groups, the moderator must move the group toward specific objectives; draw out all participants; keep the discussion balanced; clarify comments; and summarize. In doing this, the moderator must also maintain a low profile.

Beginning the Session

Open with a concise, articulate, and strong statement about the discussion purpose, the importance of the topic, and the responsibilities of the participants. Then ask participants to identify themselves and encourage people to address each other on a first name basis. (Use of nametags -- the first names in bold letter -- makes identification easier.).

Keeping to the Agenda

The purpose of an agenda is to get all topics discussed, but it need not be followed rigidly. There will be times when it is better to permit the group to explore fewer questions than to abort a fruitful discussion by insisting that they move on to the next agenda item. The first requirement is to set the rules, as:

"We have an hour and forty-five minutes to discuss three questions. I'd like to set a limit for each—thirty minutes. Then we'll have fifteen minutes to summarize. I'll tell you when the time is up. Then we can decide whether we should move on."

The discussion on a particular question may be so provocative that the group could use more time. You can say:

"Necessary" Excursions

"This discussion really seems to be getting somewhere. But we might not complete what we were asked to do if we spend much more time on it. But...your comments are so good that I don't want to turn them off. As a group, we can agree to suspend the agenda for the time being, or we might set a time limit on this question. What do you think?"

Comment Repetition

At other times, you may see the discussion bogging down because people are repeating themselves or what others have said. You can say:

"Let me see if I can summarize the points that we have made. (Summary) Is there anything someone would like to add before we move on to the next question?"

Straying from the Question

Some participants may say things that appear to have little to do with the question at hand. You should allow a limited number of such comments. They reinforce the desired natural, calm, informal atmosphere. But don't let them get out of hand. You can say:

"Can I interrupt for a moment? Your points seem to be (Summary). Can you be a bit more specific about how we can help the planners deal with those points in answering the (question)?"

Or, you can say

"You are making strong points. (Summary). But they seem to me to be straying from our question. Does anyone else agree? Should we add them to our agenda?"

Separate Agendas

A few participants may bring up matters that are outside the capacity of the water quality planning agency to resolve. People who do this usually feel so strongly that they will continue to repeat their concerns until they believe they are heard and someone will do something about them. Try to respond to their problems even though the agency has no responsibility there. You can say:

"You have hit on a matter that concerns a lot of us. Unfortunately (agency) can't do anything about it directly-at least as far as I know."

and either

"Could you see me after the session? We could talk about how and where to get your point made."

or

"I will however, bring it up with the agency staff and see if there might be some way to help. I promise you an answer."

Keeping the Discussion Balanced

Try to involve everyone. Don't let anyone dominate the discussion. Try to give all ideas a fair hearing. When it becomes clear that the group has resolved its opinion, move on to the next agenda item. Your task in keeping the discussion balanced is easier if you know the background and interests of the majority of participants.

The "Silent" Participant

Try to draw out the "silent participant." Once the silent participant speaks, help build his confidence to speak again by clarifying and perhaps defending his comments.

The Non-stop Talker

At the other extreme is the participant who goes on too long. You can shut him off by putting a time limit on all speakers or by asking other participants to comment on what's been said by the "non-stop talker."

The Skewed Discussion

What about those times when you sense that the discussion is going only one way, and yet you know that there is another point of view? You can say:

"Could I interrupt here? What I've been hearing is (Summary). From what I've been reading in the papers, some people don't agree. Am I wrong?"

Or, more directly

"Wait a minute. Isn't there another point of view? (State it). "

Using Conflict

Differing opinions -- reasoned, fairly calm, focusing on ideas -- is what discussion is all about. Your task is to assure that all opinions are expressed and that participants understand the areas of agreement and disagreement.

Clarifying

One method to help assure this understanding is to use a blackboard (or display board) to list the points of agreement and disagreement on various issues. You may go a step further- clarifying the nature of the comments by listing agreements and disagreements according to whether the group considers them fact or opinion. At times it is helpful to have the group consider the strength of the agreements and disagreements-by listing them in priority order.

Clarifying Comments

You must assure that all comments, whether or not there is disagreement, are understood. Occasionally you will see participants confused because they are not talking about the same thing.

By the Moderator

One method to resolve the problem is for you to clarify what a participant said.

By the Group

At other times, you can ask members of the group to clarify points which apparently are confusing others.

Summarizing Comments

Frequently, you must summarize what has been said (1) when it appears that no new points are being made, (2) at the conclusion of a discussion of any question, and (3) at the end of the session in preparation for reporting back to the full group.

The session recorder can greatly facilitate your summary of points at the end of a discussion.

Discussion Failure

At times, a discussion group will get little done no matter how hard you and the participants try. When such a situation occurs, relax-and wait until next time.

Dealing with Hostility

In both formal and informal public meetings, the conflict of ideas is desirable; hostility isn't. If permitted to get out of hand, hostility can disrupt the meeting, prevent the group from achieving its goals, and send people away determined not to attend the next meeting.

Hostility has many forms: demonstrations, challenges to someone's motives or integrity, personal derision, sarcasm, constant interruptions, or attempts to monopolize the discussion.

Opening Statement

In both formal public meetings and the general session of the informal meetings, you should forcefully state the rules from the outset:

"Our purpose tonight is to provide the opportunity for everyone to express his or her opinion. We expect and want diversity and the identification of all differences among us. I want to stress, however, that we can only achieve our purpose if we limit our comments to facts and ideas, and not get involved in personal criticism."

No Anger

If hostility surfaces, remain calm. Tempers can't be cooled off if the moderator loses his cool, too.

Meeting Disruption

At times, hostility from a small number of people may be so great (e.g., a demonstration) that the future progress of the meeting itself is threatened. Offer to meet separately with the disrupters to talk about their concerns. Sometimes, however, that won't work. Then you should consider calling a recess. The value of this approach is that you are enlisting the assistance of the majority, who may be able to convince the minority to change its tactics.

Personal Attacks

When a speaker begins to deride another, you must stop it quickly.